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Initiative involving industry, education would benefit us all

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The time is now, not later, to bring all state educational parties and industry leaders together to decide a course of action that will benefit all Alabama residents.

The state Commission on Higher Education believes that course of action is to create what's known as a PK-20 education system. Employment opportunities are knocking; we must answer with an educated work force.

What is a PK-20 education system? It is a system that consolidates established and proven education activities with industry's current resources and future needs. The creation of a comprehensive PK-20 system will not only better prepare Alabama students for the jobs of the 21st century, but will also enhance our state's economic competitiveness. Similar initiatives in other states already are successfully delivering well-prepared work forces.

Challenges:

Alabama has recently benefited from an upsurge in economic development that has brought more jobs and opportunities to the state. However, with that good news there are challenges; revenue shortfalls projected for next year will impact state services and public education.

The implementation of a well-developed education plan must be set in motion. Through education, we will be able to respond to changing economic climates in a positive, proactive manner. Education is an investment. Through it, we provide our citizens a better overall lifestyle and place our state in an even better position to compete in a global economy.

Yet, education and industry must engage early in a student's career to align coursework with advanced instructional preparation focusing on future employment. This strategy should start before kindergarten, with specific criteria to be met throughout a student's education.

A more cooperative and consolidated effort will provide expanded education opportunities for students, reduce the number of drop-outs, and increase high school and college retention and graduation rates. The costs related to remedial/transitional education will thus decrease, expediting the creation of an educated, marketable work force - a key component to economic development.

So, how do we create and maintain these opportunities? Wednesday, a plan to bring all parties to the table will be presented in a joint meeting of the state Board of Education and the Alabama Commission on Higher Education. Elected and appointed officials will hear a presentation on the PK-20 Initiative - a strategy to provide a seamless system of education aligning education resources with industry needs while providing ongoing support for students.

Huge dividends:

Combining the strengths of our education system with industry's needs will pay huge dividends. But, to make this a reality, specific goals must be defined and met. This strategy can evolve through a state PK-20

system that specifically targets process and content. Many states throughout the nation are tailoring education components to industry needs, moving them ahead of Alabama. We must respond.

What's the end result? A strong work force and a better-prepared employee to meet the demands of today's competitive work environment. Whether the goal is a general laborer or a research scientist, education and training are key ingredients to ensuring Alabama a competitive market edge now and in the future.

A PK-20 system will deliver what Alabama needs and deserves. Granted, education agencies are talking to each other, but not on a formal basis. A PK-20 system will coalesce the goals and needs of all concerned - industry leaders, the Legislature and education in an organized, systematic process to better serve students. Gregory G. Fitch is executive director of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education. E-mail: gregory.fitch@ache.alabama.gov.

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